

THE SPUR OF FATE

By Ashley Towne

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"Learn more, Kevski," said Darrell. "Don't waste your time in assassination, but devote it all to the discovery of this secret. Do this for me by way of gratitude to win a great reward and to get to America, which is your dream."

Kevski was silent, fingering the rifle and staring across the little square at



He looked at the man with that the

Kilziar, who, having lighted a cigar, was gathering his coat about him before stepping out into the rain.

"I will do what you tell me," said Kevski suddenly, and as if it were a part of his promise, he turned his eyes away from the man he hated. Then, without more words, he hurried away down the dark street.

The lights still burned in the lower windows of the inn, and those above were dark.

"My love is threatened by a hundred deaths," said Darrell to himself as he crossed the road. "This insane and senseless toll will burn her with fever. She neither eats nor sleeps, so Korna says."

The sentry challenged, and Darrell gave his name. With little delay he was ushered into Vera's presence. She was quite alone and seemed to have been waiting for him before the embers of a fire in a broad fireplace.

"I am glad to see you," she said. "It is a pleasure I have lacked in these last few days. Moreover, you look much more cheerful than when I saw you last. What is the cause of it—the weather perhaps?"

"I have always enjoyed a great reputation for cheerfulness," answered Darrell. "You alone seem to have found my society depressing. Yet that is not surprising perhaps. There is a malady which, according to all the poets, will make any man sigh, and I have never had it before."

"That is rather a pretty speech," said Vera. "I have conversed principally during these last days about corn and gunpowder. A change cheers me. Yet I think you did not come at this late hour for that alone."

"I came to tell you of a discovery that I have made, or, rather, hope to make," answered Darrell. "Perhaps you know more of it than I do, yet I cannot assume that you possess the information. Let me not waste words. If this place falls and you are taken, we may grant that Circassia's cause is lost, may we not?"

"The place will not fall," answered Vera. "But, admitting your supposition, what follows?"

"If you, with your best officers and a small picked force, could escape and return to Circassia, there would still be hope. I have learned that there is a secret way along the face of the mountains."

"And you would have me take it, leaving my soldiers to be butchered," said Vera. "That is not my idea of loyalty, which should have two sides."

"Read the history of war," answered Darrell. "Have not princes and patriots saved themselves when their lives were essential to the cause they served? Remember, I speak of the last emergency, when it has become absolutely impossible to hold the place. As for the garrison, the Russians will treat your troops as prisoners of war."

"I do not deny," she replied, "that if I could put myself at the head of another army and continue to fight for my country I should consider it my duty to escape in case Gredskov were taken by assault and resistance here became useless. It would be equally the duty of the humblest soldier in the army. But we cannot lose this fight and yet continue the struggle. So I shall remain and share the fate of the troops."

"It is what I expected you to say," he rejoined. "If you had spoken otherwise, you would not have been the woman who danced and sang with me at the students' ball in Paris. I can only wish that the price were equally steadfast."

"Kilziar?" queried Vera. "Again you wrong him, my friend. He may not succeed, but he will die fighting. Of that I am certain. He may not win his way out of the city, but he will at least make the trial by the main gate and not by any secret way. He may be a man as selfish as you think him, but it is sure that his selfishness now fights upon the side of our cause."

"For what reward?" asked Darrell, with a tremor of cold fear.

"Even myself," she replied. "My

hand is promised to the prince if he can lead our army out of this city and cut a way through the ranks of the besiegers."

"So good a soldier should win any battle for a prize so exalted," answered Darrell, his voice sounding to him as if it were an echo in the corners of the room. "We may then surely expect a sortie, and I trust you will permit me to wear a sword when the day comes."

He stepped back toward the door, as if to withdraw. Vera followed him with so steady and searching a glance that he could scarcely endure it.

"I shall not be the first woman of princely rank," she said, "who has torn out her heart as a gift to her country."

"Nor Kilziar the first scoundrel to exact such a pledge!" he cried; then, hastily: "Pardon me! I am not myself. If you have honored him even with a promise thus qualified, my life should be sealed. Command me always."

Outside the rain still fell relentlessly. At a corner of the street two officers, meeting by chance, had stepped back to the shelter of a projecting roof. Darrell, passing, recognized one of them as Korna.

"This rain is help from heaven," cried the colonel. "A few days more of it, and these Russians will be in such a condition that we can tear through them as if they were wet paper."

"You have hope, then?" said Darrell in a cheerful tone.

"Plenty of it," responded Korna. "The hills round Gredskov have a fever of their own that the rain nourishes as if it were grass. Half their men will die of it, and as it is particularly hard upon all who are past forty, their generals will all be flat on their backs, with colonels and captains by the dozen to keep them company. We shall carve our way out of this place."

"I begin to believe you," said his companion, "but what the devil we shall do afterward with the roads in this condition I don't know."

"I asked Prince Kilziar that," replied Korna, with a laugh. "He whined straight up into the air, as his habit is, and answered me that it made no difference to him."

"It made no difference to him," repeated Darrell. "That is a hard saying to interpret, yet there is meaning in it. Good night, gentlemen."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAUSE TRIUMPHS.

FOR five succeeding days there was no glimpse of the sun. The rain was not violent, but enough fell to keep the roads impassable and to drench the besiegers. Rumors of their straits were rife in the city, and the defenders were in good spirits despite their own discomfort. Then upon the sixth day the sun appeared in a rift between two storms, as the event proved, and the Russians honored him with a lively cannonade.

There seemed no reason to anticipate a serious result from this fire. A certain number of houses would certainly be destroyed and a few lives lost, but the Russian guns were not heavy enough to affect the defenses. It was the unexpected, however, which happened. Against all probability the enemy's shells reached the two largest food depots in the city and set them on fire. The buildings had been supposed to contain too little wood to burn. They

were outwardly stone structures, and yet the flames found material within them for stubborn and disastrous conflagrations. The loss was almost critical, and the knowledge of it depressed the army to an alarming degree.

The rain set in again upon the following day, but ceased about noon, though the clouds did not break. In the full of the storm appeared a white flag advancing from the enemy, and it proved to cover a demand for surrender. A defiant reply was returned, but to a subsequent suggestion for a conference a council of generals returned a favorable answer.

"Kilziar advocated it," said Korna in telling the news to Darrell. "He will offer terms, he said, and we shall learn something of their condition. The suggestion was that Motman Khan, with an escort of five officers, meet General Panin, commander in chief of their forces, between the lines. It was considered unwise for the princess to

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His own officers stared at him in amazement, and Darrell, standing in the darkest shadow to avoid recognition by Getchikoff, knew not what to expect. Then suddenly in the midst of his speech the old general flung up both hands to his forehead and fell across the table behind which he had been standing. When they raised him up, he was seen to be beyond the control of reason, raving and muttering in the delirium of fever.

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sensitive of the khan, and I am going with him."

"Will you take this message to the princess?" said Darrell. "I believe that my presence with General Durban may be of the greatest value to the Circassian army, and I beg of her as the greatest favor she can ever grant me that I may be permitted to form one of the general's escort."

Darrell waited in great anxiety for a reply to this plea, and he was deeply gratified when Korna returned with word that he could go—in a colonel's uniform.

"Durban was consulted," said Korna, "and he seemed pleased. The man has taken a great fancy to you."

"Thank heaven I have cultivated his acquaintance during this siege," replied Darrell.

The conference was held in a tent pitched on a hillside midway between the lines. The rain had recommenced, and a rivulet could be heard running under the rough floor of boards. Upon entering, Darrell had seen first the tall figure of General Panin, the Russian commander. He must have been a man of fine presence at his best, but now his visage was grotesquely reddened with fever and his eyes had almost the look of madness. By his side stood Ivan Getchikoff, the man whom Darrell had hoped to see. Yet he was greatly surprised to note from the first formalities that Getchikoff was the ranking officer present aside from Panin. His uniform showed that he had been advanced another grade in the short time since Darrell had seen him in Gredskov, probably because he was the son of his distinguished father rather than for his own merits. Yet there should have been many who would rank him in so considerable an army. Doubtless the hill fever accounted for their absence, and Darrell remembered Korna's saying that the disease prostrated men past forty.

The conference opened with a plain statement from General Panin. He showed a good knowledge of the condition of the besieged, especially in the matter of food supply, and he pointed out with an old soldier's precision the ultimate fall of the garrison.

"Your battle is lost," he said. "It is wise for you to make terms. I speak with the full authority of my government when I say that peace is the principal aim sought. The mildness of the former ear in dealing with the revolt that was quelled in '96 should be known to you all. The same policy will be pursued today if hostilities are at once suspended. There is no craving for revenge if a full submission is made. We demand the delivery of the following prisoners, who have been leaders in this insane undertaking."

Here he read a list beginning with "the person styling himself Motman Khan." The others were officers directly associated with the prince, and Durban himself was not one of them, to his own great surprise. Judging from the list, the purpose of Russia was to secure men who had held military commissions in her service at the time of the uprising, as Durban had not. The net was spread for traitorous soldiers.

Upon the surrender of these persons, Panin continued, with the arms and ammunition of the force, a general parole would be granted, and the troops would be permitted to return to their homes, supplies and means of protection during the journey being guaranteed.

The terms were surprisingly liberal, but they were absolutely impossible

"What is the nature of that influence?" asked the prince.

"If I disclose it to any one," answered Darrell, "it ceases to be valid. You must take my word in the dark that it exists."

"This does not greatly encourage me," rejoined Kilziar.

"Nevertheless," said Vera, "Mr. Darrell's plan should be tried. If he can prolong the negotiations for a day, we shall have better roads for our march westward, and the enemy will gain nothing."

"I require no more than permission to speak with General Getchikoff alone," said Darrell.

"You will not get it from him," growled Kilziar. "I think we waste time."

Darrell merely bowed. He had caught the eye of General Durban and was satisfied by a glance that he would have no obstacle put in his way when the conference should meet again on the morrow. Vera had seen this by-play, and she also remained silent.

Durban presently withdrew and Darrell with him. They walked together in silence toward a point of the fortifications which commanded what must be the field of their endeavor if they should make the attempt to cut the Russian lines.

There seemed to be a considerable movement of the Russian troops.

"They are closing in a bit," said Durban after a long look through his field-glasses. "Upon my word, they are not all dead of fever."

"General," said Darrell, "you are an old soldier and a good one. Have we a chance?"

"None whatever," replied the general, with impressive calm. "The formation of the country enables the enemy to plant guns beyond our range, yet sweeping every road by which we can move out. There is no way for us to get our own guns into effective action, for they would shoot us off the face of the earth while we were limbering up. Only the merest rags of our army would ever get through, and they could never get together again into an effective military body. A picked force might surround the princess and carry her to safety, but the chances would be against it."

"Do you think that is what Prince Kilziar means to do?"

"I know not," answered Durban, "but this I know—whatever he intends, it is not what he says."

Further than that the general declined to speak, and the two men fell to praising a gorgeously beautiful sunset which might well be the last that they would ever see.

"By the way," said Durban as they were about to separate, "you shall have your chance with Getchikoff tomorrow. What do you hope to accomplish—a day's delay?"

"I fear I can do little," answered Darrell. "The situation essentially involves defeat, whether in battle or negotiation. Kilziar and his friends are the rock on which my hopes are wrecked."

"There might be a way to get them out of the camp," said Durban, staring gloomily at the black precipices behind the town.

"It would do no good," answered Darrell. "Unless they are delivered up the Russians will take the city. Sooner or later they will surely take it, and that means massacre. It means the death of the princess, whom you and I would give our lives to save, for rest assured she will not be made prisoner."

"And our sortie tomorrow," said Dur-

ban, "is only the same thing under another name."

"The best we can hope for is a mere postponement," continued Darrell. "I may secure delay from Getchikoff, but no influence can force him to do the impossible. He has no authority to make any terms or even to show mercy, while Kilziar, whom the czar holds to be a traitor utterly beyond pardon, remains a leader of our forces or sheltered within our lines. So there's the situation. What can we make of it?"

"Tomorrow will show," answered Durban, returning Darrell's gesture of farewell.

Darrell spent a part of the evening in searching for Kevski and the balance in hard smoking and harder thinking. Somewhat after midnight he betook himself to bed and by the exercise of great determination went to sleep.

He was awakened shortly after daybreak by a hasty summons from the princess. She was dressed in her military uniform, even to sword and dagger, but when she attempted to rise from a chair upon Darrell's entrance she fell back again, lacking the strength to stand. Behind her stood the amazon, hollow-eyed, ghastly pale, the picture of despair that is too proud to be afraid.

Vera looked at Darrell steadily for some seconds and then said with dire brevity:

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CHAPTER XIX.

DEFECTION.

PRINCESS VERA received General Durban's report with a calmness that would have done credit to a veteran of a dozen wars. She was lying on a couch that had been brought down to her military workshop, and she looked pitifully ill. Behind her stood the tall amazon whom Darrell had seen on the veranda in Vladikauskas, and the face of the stern and formidable old woman was deeply lined with anxiety.

"This is mere weariness," said Vera. "It is possible that I may have overtaxed my strength. I am resting to prepare me for the work that must come tomorrow. There is plainly but one course for us. Your report makes that certainty doubly sure. We could not surrender our comrades in arms even if our case were ten times more desperate than it is. We must break through their lines."

"We have no alternative," replied Durban. "Heaven prosper us!"

"Our plans are already made," said Prince Kilziar, who was present with several of his most trusted officers. "I wish, however, that we could delay their attack for twenty-four hours."

"There is no possible chance of it," answered General Durban. "We may as well dismiss the thought."

"Your pardon, general," said Darrell; "I have reason to believe that I am in a position to exert personal influence upon General Getchikoff."

Kilziar regarded Darrell with a scowl. Since the opening of the siege they had been on terms of armed neutrality.

"What is the nature of that influence?" asked the prince.

"If I disclose it to any one," answered Darrell, "it ceases to be valid. You must take my word in the dark that it exists."

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